

The One Thing We Could Do

A sermon by Reverend Steven Epperson

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

There are good reasons and deeply felt needs that draw us as individuals and families to associate together as members of this congregation. We want our children to be spiritually and ethically well grounded in a non-dogmatic, progressive faith. We yearn for lively, thoughtful fellowship with like-minded people. We desire to develop and express our talents in art, music and singing. We would have our voices heard and votes counted in a community dedicated to making democracy real. We need the solace, sympathy and support of a caring community in times of illness and heartbreak. We yearn to act publicly in the company of others to effectively secure a more just and sustainable world. We hunger for those rare, wonderful experiences of authentic worship that feed our soul's deep yearnings. These profound and meaningful needs, and the way that responding to them helps us to discover our own gifts for ministry to others—these needs, these gifts—light up the paths that lead us to 49th and Oak, and to this room; they breathe life into this, our congregation—the kind of life that “giv[es] rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.” (James Luther Adams)

New and broader fellowship—for however personal and intimate our needs may be, we have come to know by experience the crucial importance of religious community as a means to satisfy them. Religious community, when it's got its act together, reveals how deeply inter-related we are; and once unveiled and truly experienced, that revelation inspires us to serve and act for justice, compassion, connection, and worship. It is the church, Mark Morrison-Reed asserts, that “assures us that are not struggling...alone.” Indeed, it “is *essential*, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. *Together*,” he concludes, “our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

New and living language, new and broader fellowship, expanded vision and renewed strength—by living and participating here in myriad ways, we can explore and express deep needs, and experience the pleasure of satisfying them in service to others and in being served in return. But does the horizon of that experience end at the borders of 49th and Oak; does it grind to a halt at the limits of our parish—a territory that extends across this city and beyond to where the members of our church, alone, reside?

That is what I want to focus on today, that, and this congregation's voluntary association with Unitarian congregations and fellowships across Canada. Because I believe that everything that I said about this congregation—the needs we bring, the gifts for ministry we share, the new and living language we could speak, the new and broader fellowship in which we could revel, the wider vision, the renewal of our strength—all this could be extended and amplified through a meaningful and renewed commitment by me and our congregation to the vitality, vision and growth of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

In my remarks, I will refer to the Council by its acronym—the CUC. And for those of you who don't know; let me just say that the CUC is the voluntary association of forty-nine Unitarian congregations and fellowships that extend east from Victoria all the way to St. John's Newfoundland. It is our equivalent to the Unitarian Universalist Association that serves over a thousand congregations in the States, and the two hundred churches and groups served by the General Assembly of Unitarians and Free Christian Churches in Great Britain.

The purpose of the CUC is growing vital Unitarian communities in Canada. It aims to connect, nurture and empower Canadian Unitarians and their congregations, and to foster the growth and outreach of our religious movement in Canada, especially in areas of religious education, effective professional and lay ministry, worship and spiritual growth, and active participation in national social justice issues.

OK. That's the website language version. Please hold in mind what I said earlier about the needs and talents we bring to this congregation, and the task of religious community: *new and living language, new and broader fellowship, expanded vision and renewed strength.*

The spiritual and ethical life of Unitarians has and will always be expressed publicly and primarily, as individuals and families, in our congregations; that's been our congregational way for 450 years. It has served our religious tradition well—a centuries-long, voluntary association of people freely exploring, holding and expressing diverse beliefs and shared values in and through a congregational ethos.

However, Unitarians have also felt a deep urge and need to do more than just tend their own garden, more than just focusing inwardly on their separate congregations. They have reached out to other Unitarian and Universalist congregations in order to form voluntary regional, national and international associations. The impetus for broader fellowship and expanded vision expressed in creating these larger associations is also as true of us as is our focus on building and sustaining our congregations; this has been going on for centuries as well.

Compelling reasons for associating beyond congregational boundaries are obvious: by freely connecting, communicating and pooling resources, Unitarians have been able to support the creation and growth of fledgling congregations and the exchange of visiting ministers. Through association with others, we can exchange ideas about theology and worship, RE curricula, music, the arts, best practices in staffing and programming, and financial and congregational growth strategies through various media and face-to-face encounters. By meaningful connections with others through the year, and in regional and national meetings, we can overcome the experience and realities of isolation and parochialism. Our children and youth discover, *and I think this is crucially important*, that they have peers like themselves in other congregations and in other cities, regions, and countries. And finally, we connect, we pool and

direct our resources as national organizations in order to more effectively understand, speak out, influence, and have an impact beyond our individual congregations on the critical, pressing issues and needs of our times: social, economic and racial justice, the environment, democracy, consumerism, peace-making, religious freedom and exploration, gender and sexual equity, and others.

Congregational life and self-governance, the efforts of individuals and church committees and ministers are crucial for living out publicly the consequences of our values and beliefs. But alone, disconnected from other Unitarians, their congregations, and national associations—it just can't add up to creating the kind of critical mass necessary to exercise influence beyond a very local domain. And believe me, every time you get a group of Unitarians in Canada together to talk or fill out surveys about the vision, identity, needs and potential of our movement, they state clearly a deep and yearning desire for a “for a stronger public presence,” a “national voice,” “a clear vision,” and the “resources to back it up.” For that you need a national association with governance structures, a decision making process, communications capabilities, staff, equipment, an address, financial resources, and the means to deliver programs services and congregational support. It doesn't happen by magic or wishful thinking. But let's not lose sight of the poetry amidst the prose; all of this, still, has very much to do with *new and living language, new and broader fellowship, expanded vision and renewed strength*

(for example, see “History of the UUA/CUC Relationship and Accord,” summary results of 1990 CUC survey in formulating its first Five-Year Plan, www.cuc.ca/governance/archival/History.htm; Bruce Schwartzentruber, “CUC Five-Year Evaluation,” prepared and Presented to the CUC Board, September 2007; “Who Are We?: Interim Report,” CUC National Identity Initiative, May 2009; Rev. Steven Epperson, “CUC Survey Analysis, Questions 5 & 19,” a report to the CUC Executive Director, January 12, 2010.)

Up until 2002, Canadian Unitarians were institutionally embedded within the Unitarian Universalist Association—that was the principal way all congregations and fellowships in the United States and Canada voluntarily connected beyond their congregations. Dues went to

Boston, resources and communications flowed out from there. Canadian Unitarians met annually with the American counterparts in regional and national meetings and conferences. I am not going to go into the details of the arrangements and culture back then—it would glaze your eyes and put most of you under the pews. But do the math and paint this picture in your mind: 1000+congregations in the States; less than fifty in Canada—though officially continental in scope, the denomination always had difficulty staying more than national in its focus and programming. US issues, needs, and its ethos predominated; and increasingly, most Canadian Unitarians could not hear, explore or experience their own language, fellowship and vision in that setting.

For at least a hundred years, there have been proponents among us calling for an independent and vital Canadian Unitarian association, for developing an authentically Canadian Unitarian voice and identity. And twenty-five years ago, a young and gifted minister, Mark DeWolfe, whose life was cut tragically short by AIDS, spoke of his dream that we would appreciate the unique things—the geography, history and peoples—that Canada has tell us. And of how we might, if we would only listen closely, learn to speak the special language of this place more clearly and to greater effect.

In 2002, Canadian Unitarians voted to hive off and create the CUC—our own national association—in order, I think, to better speak our own language, and to discover our own fellowship and vision. That was only eight years ago, not quite even that. Since then, the first and pressing business was to create the policies and structure of a national organization, to connect its far-flung members and congregations, to organize and host regional and national meetings, and to begin delivering the support services—the consultations, workshops, training, and materials—our congregations and fellowships requested in order to better put down roots

and grow. For better or worse, though CUC Boards and staff have and will come and go, that work has and will continue. And here, I want to personally thank our own Mary Bennett, the now former Executive Director of the CUC, for her years of hard and inspired service in helping to launch the work of the CUC. The work of the CUC will continue to focus on its overriding responsibility, which is to grow vital Unitarian communities in Canada because our congregations and fellowships are the principal sites where we experience, explore and celebrate our spiritual and ethical lives publicly and in community. I see that work continuing well into the future.

What we have not yet achieved, where we have thus far fallen short collectively is finding our “national voice,” a “stronger public presence,” and “a clear vision” of who we are and what we want to become. This is what I want to talk about in the time remaining.

In one survey and task force after another, Canadian Unitarians have expressed a deep desire to achieve each of these: a national voice, a strong public presence, and a clear vision for us as a national religious movement. The challenges, however, are daunting. Think about it. We are a highly opinionated, independent collection of individuals whose precious limited volunteer time for service is focused primarily on our congregations. Our ethos is grass roots, democratic, and non- or anti-hierarchical. We are fixated on and celebrate our diversity. We are thin on the ground and spread across the second largest country in the world. We have a cumbersome social responsibility resolution process that only a handful of dedicated people, with time on their hands, participate in, and once passed in our annual meetings, they have few teeth and little follow through. Though we have, in fact, created the structures of a national organization—its principal purpose is service delivery to individual congregations and fellowships. And who, in the midst of all of this, is actually designated and empowered to create a compelling vision and to speak publicly, to ourselves and the nation, on our behalf in a clear, timely and compelling way; and would we be willing and able to assent and comply with this vision, this voice even if we, in fact, had them?

In the face of all these challenges, and even though we yearn for a voice, a presence, a vision—who has the wherewithal to stick with it, and the insight, the authority, the support and the means to realize and articulate them? The CUC Board? The CUC's Executive Director? The delegates at the Annual Meeting? The hardy souls who fill out yet-another CUC survey and Taskforce questionnaire? Is it the UU Ministers in Canada, or their Executive Committee? When I look at the purpose and organizational structure of the CUC, and survey our stuttering experience of the past decade and more—no clear picture emerges. And the desire for a voice, a presence, a vision sufficiently compelling to inspire us, influence this nation, and grow our movement—that yearning, that need, continues to blaze away and endure.

When I asked our bookkeeper Ravina Sangara to review the CUC's Financial Statement for 2008 and its budget for 2009, and then pressed her for what kind of portrait emerges of the organization, she told me this: it looks like a small company, running a modest deficit, and trying to keep it in check (like this church). A company holding on *conservatively* to a fair amount of money invested in marketable securities, but not investing or spending it on the equivalent of infrastructure, research and development and marketing—money that it could or should be spending if it wants to grow its company and revenue. You have to invest in yourself to grow. Thanks Ravina. This sounds like a company with little or no voice, vision, or presence.

There was a time, within the living memory of some of you, when Canadian Unitarians found and forged all three: a national voice, a vision and a presence in the land. Between 1945-55, through the work of Unitarians and their support of the Unitarian Service Committee under the leadership of Lotta Hitchmanova, we committed ourselves to reach out and assist war-ravaged survivors in Europe and Asia. We collected, bundled up, and shipped thousands of tons of clothing, food, medical supplies and toys; and we joined together to raise tens of thousands of dollars for a foster-parent plan for children in European orphanages. In many ways, this was our finest decade. And as a result, by focusing on a single concerted, decade-long service effort, Canadian Unitarians discovered who and what they were as a

national movement; and people across Canada knew who Unitarians were and that their Unitarianism, in the words of one USC brochure, meant “faith in action.”

It is no coincidence that following immediately after that decade-long effort, the Board of Trustees of this congregation sent a circular letter to all Canadian Unitarian congregations and fellowships calling for the creation of a national Unitarian organization. “The existence of Canada as a political entity, a nation, is a fact of significance for the religious liberals who live here,” our Board wrote. “We have responsibilities toward the ...life [of this] nation that are of collective concern to all Unitarians living in Canada.” And within five years, a fledgling Canadian Unitarian Council was established.

The time for speaking again with a national voice, expressing a clear vision, in order to affirm who we are and to assert “a stronger public presence” in this country with the “resources to back it up,” I believe has arrived again, and stares us in the face. It is what we desire to see, experience, and achieve.

And I want to put before you a modest proposal as means of realizing these goals: *the one thing we could do, I believe, is to commit ourselves as individuals, congregations and as a national religious denomination to a focused, decade-long project to pressure our federal government to restore a fully-funded, national affordable housing program to the federal budget, and to make it a policy priority to achieve.*

Less than two months ago, I attended a meeting hosted by the Liberal MP Ken Dryden. This was the last of over a dozen meetings held by Dryden across the country dedicated to addressing poverty in Canada. In every meeting he convoked, the message he heard loud and clear from civic and community leaders was this: the single most important thing this nation’s government could do alleviate the scourge of poverty in Canada was for the government to forge, fund and restore a credible national housing program.

International covenants and treaties have declared housing a fundamental human right. Since 1993, when it was slashed from the federal budget, Canada is the only G8 nation with no national affordable housing program. More than 300,000 people in this country are homeless; close to 3 million families are struggling with basic, core housing needs. The inadequacy of decent housing for our First Nations and Inuit people is an international disgrace and a human rights catastrophe. Ten years ago, Canada's mayors declared that we have a national housing crisis that affects not only the homeless, it impacts millions of households and a generation of young people in working and middle class families who increasingly are falling into despair and depression as their hopes for access to decent affordable housing evaporate.

My proposal for what Canadian Unitarians could do comes with an outline for action. First, I call on the UCV Board of Trustees to formally endorse this proposal so that I can speak and work on its behalf and in the name of this congregation. Second, with the support of this congregation's delegates, I will place before the upcoming CUC Annual Business Meeting what is called "A Special Resolution with Notice" for approval by CUC delegates at the Annual Meeting. This form of resolution bypasses the cumbersome process for multi-year study and approval required by the normal Social Responsibility procedure.

In sum, this resolution will call on the CUC, its member congregations, and the UU Ministers of Canada to commit to a ten-year plan whose outcome will be the restoration of a fully funded, national affordable housing program with a strategy by the federal government to achieve it as a policy priority. As well, the resolution will include a call for the CUC to establish and fund a national media and communications campaign; the forging of alliances with effective housing advocates in all three levels of government, civil society and religious organizations; and this is a crucial, for Unitarian congregations to designate one evening every month for a letter

writing campaign wherein we communicate our individual and collective voice in favour of the proposal for a national housing program to our elected government officials.

Let me remind you, every time I have asked politicians, journalists, and community advocates: “what can an individual congregation of good people, limited in numbers and resources, but great in heart and spirit, what can we do to influence public policy outcomes?” They have answered: letters to their elected representatives. “They listen to and are influenced by pressure from their constituents.” This may be kitchen sink, nuts and bolts, Political Science 101, but it can work; and we sorely undervalue and rarely use it. It’s time to begin the work, and commit to it all the way until it is achieved. In so doing, I believe, we may yet discover the unique things that Canada has to tell us and learn to speak the special language of this place more clearly and to greater effect. We could discover new and living language, new and broader fellowship, expanded vision and renewed strength—we could discover ourselves—our vision and our voice.

I am fifty-five. In the ten years I have left to serve in active parish ministry, it is my hope, my dream, my deeply felt and yearning desire to see these amazing things come to pass. I believe they will.

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